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FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5553
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC PRIORITY 0050
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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000608

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION FIGURE'S ARREST DRAWS PROTEST MARCHERS

Classified By: Steve Banks, pol/econ chief, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The May 7 arrest of a minor opposition personality led to a protest march on the National Security Service headquarters May 9. Police were poorly prepared for the unscheduled event. When several officers unwisely interposed themselves in front of -- then got swallowed by -- the crowd, other police apparently waded into the fray with batons and tear gas. However, more senior police officials negotiated with protest leaders, and a more or less peaceful disengagement was soon reached, though not before some injuries were sustained on both sides. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) The authorities arrested Alexander Arzumanyan May 7 on suspicion of money laundering. Arzumanyan was former President Ter-Petrosyan's last foreign minister, stepping down in 1998 when Ter-Petrosyan resigned. Press reports indicate that 55,400 dollars in cash was found in Arzumanyan's apartment, which had recently been transferred from Moscow. A similar sum was reportedly seized from an Arzumanyan ally, Vahan Shirkhanian, who seems not to have been arrested. A family representative tacitly acknowledged that approximately this amount of cash was seized from the Arzumanyan home, and suggested that it may have been intended to pay for costs associated with public demonstrations.

¶3. (C) Arzumanyan is a leader of a previously little-remarked opposition movement called "Civil Disobedience." Arzumanyan apparently has links to a wide variety of opposition politicians, though he apparently no longer considers himself a member of Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Movement. The government presumably believes that Arzumanyan and his cohorts may have hoped to help fund a "rose revolution-style" uprising in Armenia, and the authorities may well not be wrong about this. Arzumanyan has already been visited several times in detention by his lawyer and a human rights NGO, and his wife tells us they report he is in good health and has suffered no mistreatment.

¶3. (C) The Impeachment Bloc's latest rally, May 9, (in cooperation with its opposition allies, the Republic and the New Times parties) led to a briefly-chaotic melee with police. Police deployed tear gas to disperse the crowd; a small number of demonstrators and several policemen were reported injured in the fracas. At least one protester was beaten in the face. The demonstrators had marched from Matenadaran Square (where they had held valid permits for a rally) to the National Security Service (NSS) headquarters, where they intended to protest the detention of minor opposition figure: former Prime Minister Alexander Arzumanyan (see paragraph 6).

¶4. (C) Republic Party leader Aram Sargsyan, one of the leaders of the rally, told us that the trouble ensued when a row of about ten mid-ranking (captains and lieutenants) police officers attempted to prevent the large mass of demonstrators from approaching the NSS building. When these

officers were swept back by the weight of the crowd, other police rushed to retrieve them from the crowd, brandishing batons. When the Yerevan chief of police and the local police district commander arrived on the scene soon after, the two sides quickly negotiated a peaceful disentanglement of the melee. The ralliers were permitted to read their prepared statement on Arzumanian, and then they promptly withdrew back to the Matenadaran, Sargsian said. Arzumanian's AmCit wife was also present at the protest, and she also told us later that the police seemed overall to behave honorably and simply to want to preserve order. Leaders on both sides dealt with each other in good faith.

GODFREY